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Childhood AND Conversion

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CHILDHOOD

AND

CONVERSION.

By Geo. G. Smith, D.D.,
Of the North Georgia Conference.

"*Forbid them not.*"

SUNDAY-SCHOOL DEPARTMENT.

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EDITORIAL NOTE.

THE pastoral care of children is enjoined by the direct command of Christ, who said to Peter, and through him to every minister of the gospel, "*Feed my lambs.*" Children form a large part of our religious communities, and by far the most impressible and hopeful part. No minister, therefore, who would "make full proof of his ministry," can neglect them.

Our Church recognizes children as a part of the pastor's charge, and makes it his duty to "speak to them personally and kindly on experimental and practical godliness, according to their capacity; pray earnestly for them, and cause them to be faithfully instructed in the nature, design, privileges, and obligations of their baptism;" and "as soon as they comprehend the responsibilities involved in a public profession of faith in Christ, and give evidence of a sincere and earnest determination to discharge the same, see that they be duly recognized as members of the Church, agreeably to the provision of the Discipline." (See Discipline, page 126.)

Public preaching from the pulpit to children is a duty which no minister of the gospel can safely or consistently neglect. "Upon what plea can he justify himself in addressing his words of invitation and counsel chiefly to the comparatively hopeless minority of adults, to the neglect of an obviously more hopeful majority of impressible children?"

Mr. Wesley preached often to the children, and required his preachers to do the same. The sainted

Fletcher made a specialty of preaching to the children of his parish. In the eighteenth century there were wonderful revivals among children in Germany, under the preaching of Count Zinzendorf. Jonathan Edwards witnessed marvelous results of public preaching upon the children of his day, and records instances of remarkable conversions of children under ten years of age.

Many of our successful pastors and preachers in modern times have given special attention to the children of their congregations, and great results have followed. Not only have multitudes of children been converted and brought into the Church, but the revivals beginning with them have spread through the congregations, and many adults have been saved as the "fruits of the children's revival."

The author of the following admirable treatise is extensively known as "The Children's Preacher." He has given the best days of more than twenty-five years to the study of childhood and the best methods of teaching and preaching to children in view of bringing them to Christ. He has given us in this little book his maturest thoughts on the subject, and the results of a wide and varied experience. We are not surprised, therefore, to find it, without question, the best thing we have yet seen from his facile and prolific pen. We take pleasure in placing the seal of editorial indorsement upon it, and in recommending it to all parents, Sunday-school teachers, pastors, and others interested in the religious training of children.

W. G. E. CUNNYNGHAM,
Sunday-school Editor.

NASHVILLE, TENN., Nov., 1890.

INTRODUCTION.

Few men known to me have given as constant and intelligent attention to religion in its relation to children as the author of this little book, which the wise will judge by its matter, not its size. His experience as child, father, and preacher fits him to be a teacher on the subject he now urges upon the conscience of the Church. His father was an earnest Christian, his mother a holy woman, both of them known to me nearly forty years ago. Back of them was an ancestry of godly people; parents and grandparents have blessed him with what is good in heredity, and in him they also are blessed. My friend's parents believed in religious children, and George, very naturally in the divine order of life, was converted when a very little boy.

As occasion made it wise, the author has been preaching to children ever since he began; for years past his ministry—having many "seals"—has been consecrated to childhood. I have heard him and studied him in his children's meetings: they are without a trace of fanaticism or folly; they are absolutely free from flippancy or coarseness; most thoroughly do I believe in them. Happy is that community to which this "children's evangelist" is called to preach the gospel!

And it is the gospel—the old, ever-new gospel—he preaches. He preaches the same gospel to children we all try to preach to the congregation of men and women; only he remembers that he is preaching to children. A vain man, who mistakes obscurity for depth, who considers long words the proof of learning, who is jealous of his reputation, should not preach to children until he himself is converted; for when a man like this tries to preach simply, he becomes silly.

The author of this book—as "Brother George" he is known to thousands of our children, and grown people too, converted under his ministry in childhood—preaches the gospel to little people with faith perfect in its adaptedness to young life. He *preaches* it; a very different thing from *explaining* it. He knows—by spiritual intuition as well as by experiment as scientific in method and conclusion as any thing done in the laboratory—that religious truth is as normal to the young mind as light is to a baby's eye. The young eye distinguishes colors before the mind back of it understands optics, and the child-spirit responds to the story of Jesus long before it can understand words about the plan of salvation. As to seeing and understanding, John Tyndall himself gets the good of his eyes and of light by using his eyes, and not because he thinks he comprehends the science of seeing. No man, if he knew enough to build a perfect creed, was ever yet saved through compre-

hending doctrine, but through trusting and loving a person—the Lord Jesus Christ.

May this little book go into every home, and touch the hearts of all who have to do with children! Evangelical, experimental, spiritual, taught in the Scriptures from a child, Methodist and orthodox, we may safely heed what this writer has to say to us concerning our duties and the needs of our children.

We cannot begin too soon—although we begin before they are born, which is the best way—to seek the conversion of our children. It is easy to begin too late. The enemy that "soweth tares while men sleep" is himself always awake. ATTICUS G. HAYGOOD.

Sheffield, Ala., October 11, 1890.

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CHILDHOOD AND CONVERSION.

CHAPTER I.

DO CHILDREN NEED CONVERSION?

THE question, "Do children need conversion?" can only be answered by answering two others: First, What is meant by children? and, second, What is meant by conversion? I do not mean by children infants who do not know right from wrong. They cannot be converted, and they are saved if they die. These two statements are not likely to be controverted, and need not be discussed. I mean by children those who have reached an age when they hear the voice of conscience and realize a moral obligation. I do not know how early this may be: at three, four, or five years old it may be; at eight or

ten it nearly always is. When the idea "I ought" enters into the child's mind, then he is the child of whom I am speaking. His idea of obligation may not be very intelligent nor very advanced, but it is there. "They go astray from their birth, speaking lies," is sadly true, and there comes a time when a little one feels and knows that a lie is wrong. They are little socialists who feel that all is theirs; but there comes a time when the rights of property are recognized. A little boy playing in the street, against his mother's order, awakens to the fact that he has broken God's command by disobedience. He knows the law, he knows he has broken it. He knows he is a sinner. I cannot discuss here the amount of his guilt nor the punishment it involves; I simply recognize the fact. He has consciously violated a known law: he is a sinner. These sins may be of ignorance, these sins may be of the infirmity of childhood, but they are

sins. The first element in conversion is forgiveness. The sins to us may seem very venial, almost too small for notice; they are not gross, not specially harmful, but they are sins. They indicate a tendency. These sins demand and must have forgiveness, and this tendency must be corrected. This sinfulness of life, while often hidden from the eyes of a partial parent, or excused when it is discovered, is never hidden from the child himself. The first work of the Spirit is to convince one of sin.

Conversion demands regeneration, and the child needs it because it is born with a sinward nature, which naturally impels it toward wrong-doing. I know there is among Pelagians and semi-Pelagians a doubt of this fact, and I know Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics claim that the water of baptism washes this sinful stain away; but I am sure that Article VII. of our Church is sustained by the experience of every child

of man who properly reads his own heart. This new nature, which hates sin and conquers it, is given to the believer; it is *not* that work of the Holy Spirit which is the work of the divine sovereignty, and which by the Calvinists is called regeneration, but that purifying of the heart by faith which comes to him who, having received Jesus as the Saviour, has received the gift of the Holy Ghost.

This conversion, presenting these two features of pardon for sins and cleansing from sin, is possible to a child, and is a necessary preparation for that Christian life which it should lead. We cannot ignore this conversion; we must secure it. The carnal mind is enmity to God; and while religious training and the influences of Christian homes and Christian communities may to a large extent mitigate this natural tendency in young children, yet, unless the child for itself accepts the Saviour, and by a volun-

tary surrender gives its life to him, and thus repenting and believing becomes genuinely a Christian, it will never submit itself to the control of his law. In another chapter we may return to this subject; here it is sufficient to assert and enforce two statements:

1. That the child is a sinner, and needs pardon.

2. That the child is not by nature inclined to obedience to God's law, and needs a new nature.

This pardon granted and this new nature given constitute conversion, and it is to urge upon all the necessity of securing this result that these pages are written.

The question arises, "Is this possible? Can little children, who do not know even how to answer intelligently all the questions of a short catechism, can these little children be converted?"

The Catholics, Roman and Anglo, say they have been, they are already Christians.

The Unitarian and Rationalist say they do not need to be converted; the semi-Pelagian says they were born, by virtue of Christ's death for them, with capacity to do what God demands of them, and do not need personal repentance or personal faith to bring them into this state; and many, very many, say they do need a change of heart, and that change of heart cannot come till they personally accept Jesus as a Saviour and repent of their sins, and this they cannot do in early childhood. The question I propose to discuss in the next few pages is the one suggested here: "Can little children repent and believe the gospel, and thus be converted?" Let us see.

CHAPTER II.

THE CHILD CAN REPENT.

REPENTANCE must precede faith, and there can be no genuine conversion where repentance is absent. To repent and believe the gospel was the Master's teaching to those to whom he came. "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish," he said to the Jews at another time. "Repent and be converted," said the apostle after his resurrection. What did he mean by it? If repentance is what the Catholics think it is, if it is what Jeremy Taylor thought it was, if repentance is what some of the hyper-Calvinists think it is, I should at once despair of a child's repenting. If repentance, however, is the knowledge of sin, sorrow for sin, and determination to forsake sin, then surely there is no difficulty in a child's

evangelical repentance. Perhaps if I were to ask a little boy of seven years old what repentance was, he could not give me a satisfactory answer; and if he were to ask me what it was, I could not give him one. But I have only to change my method. Thus:

"Jimmy, do you know right from wrong?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you ever do wrong?"

"Yes, sir; many and many a time."

"What does the Bible call those who do wrong?"

"Sinners."

"Are you a sinner?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sorry that you are?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you willing to quit doing wrong, and do right all the time?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you willing to begin now?"

"Yes, sir."

If we allow that these answers are made intelligently and truthfully, I do not suppose any Methodist will deny the genuineness of the repentance. I would be glad for any one to show if there exists a single difficulty in the way of a child's genuine penitence. Indeed, the possibility of its repentance is rendered a certainty if we use the divine method. If we flatter the child by telling him he is good, when we know and he knows he is not, if we excuse him for sins for which he does not even excuse himself, we may expect nothing but a mere transient feeling; but if we seek to awaken conscience and to enlighten the judgment, we may have as genuine repentance in a child of six years old as in a man of sixty; yet it will be the repentance of a child, and will have certain features of its own which would cause it to differ in some respects from the repentance of mature manhood. The sense of guilt will be less clear and the consequent unhap-

piness less severe than in adults. The child will not feel that he is the worst person in the world, and for a thousand things with which an adult reproaches himself he will have no compunctions, because he is not guilty of them. The emotional part of his repentance will be marked by none of those disturbing features which often naturally attend that of an adult. I should certainly distrust a child's conversion when he evinced an utter unconcern about his sinfulness and his sins, but I should as much distrust it if I were to see the most extravagant manifestations of poignant sorrow, and hear him bewailing crimes which I knew he had not committed. I should not expect in a child a very delicate sense of what is holy; I think it could scarcely be expected that his conscience could be as well informed and consequently as keenly sensitive as it would be in after time; nor should I distrust the sincerity of his penitence if I found that after he had

promised many things, very confidently, he should not at the first fulfill those promises by consistent conduct. To expect a child to have the stability and consistency of a man is to expect what we have no right to look for.

A very little boy was playing in the mud, against his mother's orders. The father asked him how he came to be so muddy; he promptly answered that he fell down. His father, at family prayer, the child with him, prayed that God would bless his little boy and keep him from speaking falsehoods. The little boy rose up directly, with tears, and said: "I told you a story. I did not fall down; I played in the mud."*

A little girl went from the infant class to her mother, and said, weeping: "Last year I told you a story. I am so sorry." A kiss of forgiveness, and the heart of the child was glad again. Regret does not become remorse in a child's heart.

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*Bishop Haygood's "Our Children."

A child learns the lesson of repentance as soon as it can say, "I am sorry; I will not do it again." God has not left a child's heart without those germs of repentance which can be made fruitful by his word, attended by his Spirit, and bringing forth repentance unto life.

Repentance cannot be reformation except in intent, and the child who promises, and who fully intends to do what it is told is right, is truly penitent. But repentance alone cannot save child or man: there must be faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER III.

A CHILD CAN HAVE FAITH IN JESUS.

We are justified by faith, child or man, alike. Whatever theorists may say about the relations of children to the Church, and their need of conversion, one thing is unquestionable—the child is not by nature a believer in Jesus Christ, and he that believeth shall be saved. With reference to the condition of him who is not able to believe, we now have nothing to do. We merely recognize the fact, so plainly stated in all the New Testament, that faith in Jesus Christ is the one ground of a sinner's acceptance with God. Can a penitent child intelligently accept Jesus Christ as a Saviour? Can he exercise faith? If by faith we mean the same as the Catholic does; if we condition faith upon an intelligent con-

ception of the way of salvation, as some Calvinists do—I should unhesitatingly say that a little child incapable of such knowledge is not capable of faith. His mental faculties are not so developed that he could grasp the meaning of the Creed, or understand the rationale of the plan of salvation; but is this necessary to the faith which saves? It certainly was not the faith of the woman who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears, nor of the Philippian jailer, nor of the eunuch, nor of Lydia, and is not, I am sure, the faith which justifies. That faith is trust in a person, confidence in a promise; and that faith is not only possible to a child, but the child is of all beings the likeliest to exercise it. I say to a little girl—one in whom the sense of sinfulness has been aroused, one who has promised to give her love and service to Jesus: "You say, Bessie, you have done wrong many times?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sorry for it? and do you intend never to do wrong again?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who was it that came from heaven to save us?"

"Jesus."

"What did he do for us?"

"He died for us."

"Why did he die for us?"

"Because he loved us."

"Whom did he come to save?"

"To save sinners."

"Are you a sinner?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you save yourself?"

"No, sir."

"Can your mother save you?"

"No, sir."

"Who can?"

"Jesus."

"How can you get him to do it?"

"I must ask him."

"But suppose you ask him, will he do it?"

"Yes, sir."

"When?"

"Right away."

Now this is no imaginary conversation. I have had many just such talks with little children not eight years old, and have seen the proofs in after times of the genuineness of their faith and the reliability of their conversion. They are not only able to believe, but of all times the days of early childhood are the days in which belief is the easiest. This is not theory; it is sustained by thousands of facts—facts in our own experience, facts coming under our own observation. Jonathan Edwards tells of the conversion of Phœbe Bartlett at four years old. Walter Knox, one of the best preachers of the Georgia Conference, was converted at four years old. Dr. White, another, was converted at four years old; Rev. W. J.

Parks, at seven; his son, Harwell H. Parks, at ten; a little Presbyterian girl in Washington, Ga., at four years old; a little Baptist girl, whose story Dr. Warren told me, at six. Faith in the love of Jesus comes as naturally to a child as faith in a father's love, but it is a child's faith. The faith of a child is not so much a belief as a vision. The child trusts because with spiritual vision it sees. It is one of the blessed things of child life that children do not arrive at conclusions as a result of reasoning or of investigation. They believe on the word of those whom they love. They know it is true because those in whom they have confidence declare that it is. Not long ago I noticed a little blue-eyed boy listening with great eagerness to one of my sermons to children. After the sermon and the exercises were nearly concluded, I said: "Now I want all of you who have felt you were sinners, and asked God for Christ's sake to

forgive you and give you new hearts, to come forward and stand here, and let me talk with you." Among the first to come was this little boy. I said: "Now we will take this smallest child, and see if he knows what he is doing." So I said to him: "What is your name?"

"Charley Brown."

"How old are you?"

"Four years and a half old."

"Are you a sinner?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Did you ever do wrong?"

"Yes, sir, sometimes."

"Who came from heaven to save us?"

"Jesus."

"What did he do for us?"

"He died for us."

"Did he die for you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does Jesus love you?"

"Yes, sir; I know he does."

"Who do you love better than anybody?"

"Jesus."

"Where would you go if you were to die?"

"To heaven."

This was a remarkable boy, but he was by no means exceptional. There are very many just as bright and just as intelligent, but they are not common because of causes to which I may afterward refer. Faith has been given as the medium by which God's love is realized; and to none but children and those like children is faith easy. That they can trust in Jesus is evidenced by the fact that so many of them do. They could not give any thing like a satisfactory statement of the orthodox theory of an atonement. They only know that Jesus died for them, and that God promised to bless them, and promising he will perform.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SPIRIT'S WORK ON A CHILD'S HEART.

He would be a bold man who would venture to speak dogmatically of the time in which God's Spirit *begins* his work on a child's heart. Long before the period of personal responsibility, long before the period when an intelligent repentance and a living faith are possible—if that period can be called long which antedates their morning hours—the Divine Spirit begins his work. The light that enlighteneth every man who cometh into the world shines in the little child's heart very soon after it begins to be. There is not a song of Jesus sung in its hearing, not a prayer to God offered, not a picture of religious things which it sees on the wall, not a church-spire in the sight of the child, not a Sunday-school which it attends,

not a preaching service, that is not used by God's Spirit in preparing the way of the Lord; but there comes a time when that Spirit who convinceth the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment makes his presence felt. There are three very evident effects which always follow his appearing. The first is, he convinces of guilt. Children are naturally very self-righteous. Little Jack Horner, who said, "What a good boy am I," is a fair representative of average childhood. The day when a child realizes that it is a sinner may be a very early one, and the conviction may not at first be a vivid one, but it evidences the fact that there is a call to a new life, to a forgiving Father. "I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you." The dread of the future, which nearly always, if not always, goes with a true conversion, does not spring up in a child's heart in the beginning of its life, but it is

manifest in an early period, and indicates the working of the Divine Spirit on the child's heart. That these feelings do take possession of the hearts of children is unquestionable. Fear of death and, when the sense of guilt-doing has been aroused, fear of judgment are vividly present in the heart of a child.

Then there are longings after God and goodness of which the child partakes and which urge it to that which is pure and good, even though it is painfully conscious that it does not reach up to them. These are evidences of the divine call.

That there are these exercises in early childhood there can be no question, but are they divine? Are they the calls of God, or merely natural feelings aroused by the influences about the children? Are the religious susceptibilities of childhood genuine, or are they merely a superficial, transient excitement of feeling? It is usual for those

who have much to do with excitable children—and all children are so to a great extent—to give very earnest warnings about trusting to these apparent impressions; and these persons suggest, if they do not express very decided doubts as to whether these impressions are divine in their origin. I must confess I am not able to tell exactly what kind of a tree it is until I have seen the fruit; and when I see the fruit, I am not prepared then to deny that it is fruit because I cannot see how this thing could be. I see in a child manifestations which if seen in an adult I would call evidences of divine working, and I certainly have no reason to say in a child they are human or diabolical in their origin.

These religious convictions are not found in every child, nor always in children of the same age. I once asked in a congregation of some hundreds of people if there was a man among them who could say that before

he was fifteen years old he had never felt the Divine Spirit moving on his heart. A man of twenty-five years of age rose and said he never had a religious impression or conviction till he was twenty-one years old. He was an honest man, and stated the fact as it was. I said to him: "Was your father religious?"

"Yes; he is a deacon in the Baptist Church."

"Did you ever hear him pray?"

"No, sir."

"Did you ever see him pray?"

"No, sir."

"Did he ever teach you about God?"

"No, sir."

"Did you ever go to Sunday-school?"

"Never, till I was grown."

"Did you ever go to church?"

"I never heard a sermon till I was grown."

"Did your mother pray?"

"She is a mighty good woman, but I never saw her pray."

"Were you ever taught to pray?"

"No, sir, never."

"Then," said I, "it would have been a miracle if you had ever felt God's Spirit on your heart when no door had been opened for his entrance."

I once asked a little boy of four years old how long he had loved Jesus.

"I've been loving him all the time," said the child.

That God does work on the child-heart is, I think, plainly shown by every child's experience. I think there are none of us who could very clearly tell when we first felt these divine movings on our hearts. I have preached more sermons to children, perhaps, than any man in this country, and these children have been of all classes; but I never found any, when a body of them was gathered together, who were not evi-

dently taught of God, and taught that they should come to Christ. They at least are always ready to respond to the invitations of the gospel. I do not now recall that I have ever seen a child under four years old whom I thought had intelligent religious convictions, and only a few at that age, very many more at six, and most at eight or ten.

God called Samuel at six years old. We do not know how soon David and Daniel and Timothy and John the Baptist knew the Lord. Richard Baxter never knew when he first heard God's call to him; John Wesley communed at eight years old; Dr. James E. Evans was converted at ten.

Did Jesus mean what he said when he said these things were revealed to babes, and out of the mouths of babes and sucklings God had perfected praise? God does move in the way of genuine awakening and conviction on a little child's heart; but we despise these little ones, and often offend them by our coldness and skepticism.

CHAPTER V.

THE SPIRIT'S WITNESS TO A CHILD'S HEART.

When there has been a genuine repentance and a true faith, there has resulted a conversion, and the fact of this conversion is evidenced to the consciousness of the child. There is a religious experience. Whether in adult or child, there are evidences of a divine life of which one cannot be entirely ignorant. If children are really converted, then children have the divine witness to their hearts that they are so. In those Churches in which the detail of Christian experience is a prerequisite to admission to membership there is sometimes hesitancy in receiving children because they do not and cannot give such a recital of their exercises of heart as is satisfactory. There is oftentimes as much error resultant from

the mistakes of the questioner as from the answers of the child. Children have an experience which does not materially differ from that of adults, but children have the experience of children. Take a little girl of six years old, well taught and religious in her habits, who has made a religious profession, and carefully examine her, and I think one will find about these things to be true: She has felt her sins, resolved to give them up, taken Jesus as a Saviour, and felt his peace in her heart. I was one day holding a meeting, and a little boy, very childish, with a very sweet face, applied for Church-membership. I said to him: "What is your name?"

"My name is Hugh."

"How old are you?"

"I am six, going on seven."

"Hugh, did you ever do wrong?"

"Yes; I've done wrong a heap of times."

"Hugh, who took away your sins?"

"God and Jesus."

"Why did God do it?"

"'Cause I asked him."

"When did you ask him?"

"On Sunday."

"Did God tell you he had done so?"

"He never told me in my ears."

"Where did he tell you?"

"He told me in my heart."

I asked another: "How do those feel who do wrong?"

"They feel bad."

"When they come to Jesus and ask him to forgive them, how do they feel?"

"They feel all right."

"Who do you love best of everybody?" I asked another.

"I love Jesus."

"Does Jesus love you?"

"Yes; I know he does."

The conviction of sin in children is never intense. It ought not to be. Pilgrim bore

a heavy burden for a long time, but Christiana went at once to the cross. Pilgrim fell in the Slough of Despond; but Matthew and James and John, the children, went hand in hand with their mother into the gate. I do not think the conviction and conversion of children would stand the test of the "Fourfold State," or of the "Method of Grace." I do not think they are *powerful* convictions or *powerful* conversions, but I do think they will stand the test of the Bible. Children who claim to be converted may not always be able to tell exactly the time when this conversion took place. Generally they can; sometimes they cannot; and very often they cast away their confidence because they cannot tell an experience such as they hear told by others, and which seems to them to be the only true experience. I remember—and it was not a single case—a boy who, believing he was a Christian, and endeavoring to lead a

Christian life, was shaken out of his faith by hearing some good man speak of long protracted suffering before his conversion. Do we not sometimes go beyond the Bible and farther than facts warrant by making too rugged and thorny the path into the way of life, and too great the suffering one has in becoming religious. Children do not suffer in becoming Christians. They have none of the intense pains of hell of which backsliding David speaks. They go to Jesus like Samuel went to God, and they do not emerge into a new world and ride in the sky in ecstatic delight. They do not have the rapturous height and holy joy which are oftentimes the portion of adult, especially of young adult, believers. I have rarely known a child to shout, have rarely seen one whose joy had risen so high that he lost self-control, but I should rather deplore than rejoice in a wild excitement of the joy-giving emotions in a little child; but

the positive happiness which a child experiences when it is converted is as real as the wild ecstasy of Bunyan's Pilgrim, who leaped for joy; of Charles Wesley's believer, "who rode on the sky," "nor did envy Elijah his seat."

The change in character wrought by the indwelling Spirit in the heart of a good child is not any more marked than the change in his emotions, and perhaps not as much so.

"I can see no change in my child," says an anxious mother.

"Well, suppose you cannot, is it certain there is no change? Is the child untruthful, disobedient, willful, bad-tempered?"

"No, she never was that."

"Does she pray, and go to church, and read her Bible?"

"Yes, she always did that."

"Does she live as consistently as her mother?"

"Yes, I think she does; *but I don't see that she is changed.*"

We are not to expect the grain of mustard-seed, which has just put up its spire, to bear the boughs and seed at once, but we are to see to it that the spire is there. Let us not deceive our children or ourselves. Merely to be moral is not to be religious, merely to join the Church is not to be converted, merely to have some religious sensibility is not to be a new creature; but let us not set up our ideas of what God should require in the place of what God does require. The Spirit does his work in his own way. Let us not dictate to him what to do.

CHAPTER VI.

SOME FACTS.

WHEN the comparative ease with which children can be induced to seek the Saviour and to join his Church is considered, one is absolutely amazed at the failure on the part of the evangelical Church to make the effort. God is no respecter of persons, and if any children have been saved, all children may be. I have already shown that children need conversion, that they may be converted, that they can repent, they can believe, that the Holy Spirit does work on their hearts, and that they do have a religious experience. Are these statements and the arguments which support them borne out by the facts of history? What was God's plan as set forth in the history of his saints —to form character or to reform it?

Samuel was a little boy of six years old. He did not know God, though he doubtless knew much of him. He lived in a day when there was great darkness and in a family where there was great wickedness; but when he was six years old, God called him, and he obeyed. How old was the shepherd lad of Bethlehem who afterward became David, the great king, when he began to serve God? how old was Jeremiah? how old was Daniel? how old was Josiah? John the Baptist, who was set apart from his mother's womb for his great work? Timothy, brought up in a heathen city, with his father a bigoted Greek, yet he knew the Scriptures from his youth? For many generations the Catholic Church held to the doctrine that all baptized persons were converted Christians, and, losing sight of the doctrine of justification by faith and regeneration by the Divine Spirit, there was no effort to evangelize the masses; but we no

sooner find the work of genuine spiritual religion revived than we find a special effort made to secure its blessings to children.

Richard Baxter, who began his ministry as early as 1636, never knew when he was converted; nor did John Janeway. Susanna Wesley, though the daughter of a Nonconformist, had carefully gone over the controversy between the Church of England people and Puritans at the age of twelve. Jonathan Edwards gives an extended account of a great revival in Northampton, New England, in which he says many children were converted; and he gives an account of their prayer-meetings, and a special mention was made of Phœbe Bartlett, a child of four years old, who, subjected to the rigid scrutiny of the old Puritans, gave every evidence of having been converted. Wesley's journal is full of instances of children of eight and ten years old becoming Christians, and with the greatest earnest-

ness he enjoins upon his preachers the work of striving to save the children and seeking for and expecting their conversion. Bishop Asbury was but a child, a poor gardener's son, when he was converted. In 1784, a great revival commenced in Epworth, England, of which the old *Arminian Magazine* gives account. It began with some children in a cottager's house, in a prayer-meeting. These were before the days of Sunday-schools, and when the Methodists were almost the only earnest revivalists in the kingdom. The work among children ought to have had much more attention than it did in the early days of the Church in this country; but despite the acknowledged neglect of it by the early preachers, arising from their large circuits and infrequent visits, there were many genuine conversions of little children reported.

I have given the names of only a few eminent ministers who became religious in

childhood. There ought to have been a great advance in this matter since the introduction of Sunday-schools, and there has been. If the effort to secure their conversion had gone at equal pace with the effort to secure their Sunday-school attendance, the results would have been greater. For over thirty years I have given this subject very close attention, and have preached directly to children not far from two thousand times. I have had abundant occasion to observe the results of this work, and have gathered a large number of facts to support the statements I have made in the foregoing chapters. A few incidents will suffice.

In my early ministry I preached to a congregation of children in the city of Macon. Sixty children under fourteen years of age joined the Church; fifty-eight of those sixty were received into the Church at the end of six months; and now, after the lapse of

thirty years, I do not remember more than five who went back to the world. Some of them went into other Churches, some of them are in heaven; but of those who remain nearly every one is in some Christian Church. In that meeting a little girl, the daughter of a well-to-do banker, not himself religious, was deeply affected. She was not over ten years old, but was quite intelligent. She gave her heart to Jesus. Not long after she was taken quite sick. She had scarlet fever. Her mother sat anxiously by her bedside. "Mamma," said the child, "don't cry when I am dead, for I am going to heaven where Minnie [her sister who died the year before] is. Jesus says, 'He that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.' Do you think he would cast out a little girl who comes for the pardon of her sins? I don't." With sweet confidence the little one awaited the message; it came at last. She said: "Mamma, prop me up in bed: I want

to sing." Her mother placed the pillows under her, and she sung:

"I want to be an angel,
And with the angels stand,
A crown upon my forehead,
A harp within my hand."

"O mamma," she said, "how beautiful, how bright!" and she was gone.

Mr. Spurgeon said he had taken many children into the Church, but he had never had to discipline a single one in after years. Dr. Deems told me the same thing. The universal verdict of all the ministers of all denominations, with whom I have conversed, has been to the same effect.

The little children who are led unto a genuine experience are but little children, but they know God and Jesus Christ whom he hath sent.

There are other facts, and facts to which I may refer again; one of these is that the discount—and it is large and painful on our

Church books—from what we hoped we had, and what we have secured, is not found among our children who come into the Church before they are twelve years old, but from those who come in after that period. While pleading for confidence in the professions of a child, it must be recognized that a child's religious life has features of its own, and must be looked at from a proper stand-point.

CHAPTER VII.

SOME FEATURES OF A CHILD'S RELIGION.

I HAVE avowed my belief in the possibility of a child's conversion, and established its correctness as well as I could; but by the conversion of a child must not be understood the moral perfection of a child and maturity of a Christian life. I doubt whether the description of conversion given in "Alleine's Alarm," in Baxter's "Call," in Doddridge's "Rise and Progress," in Flavel's "Method of Grace," in Mr. Wesley's sermon on "The Altogether Christian," or on "Salvation by Faith," and on "Justification," and especially his sermon on "Regeneration," would be that of a converted child of ten years old. There would be a maturity in such a life which should not be looked for in an immature child; but for all

that I am sure the child may be, and is, a Christian, truly converted. There is a distinction well made between purity of intention and consistent correctness of life, between the blade and the ear and the full corn in the ear.

What is childhood religion? And what is it not? It is, certainly, a true reverence and a genuine affection for God as a heavenly Father. Perhaps this affection never rises higher than it does in a child's heart. "Whom do you love better than anybody else?" I asked a child of four years of age. "Jesus," said the child. "I love papa and mamma," said a little girl, "and God better than anybody." The perfect love, which casts out fear, is found in a child's heart in a higher degree than in the heart of a more consistent adult.

Faith in the love of Jesus, in a child's heart, is without any limit. The little one knows nothing of the atonement, as a dog-

ma, but he realizes that Jesus loves him, and because he believes that, he trusts him fully.

Love to everybody is another characteristic of a child's religion. He has no limit to his affection for his fellows. Hate is a stranger to a child's heart.

A sense of obligation is another feature of his life. "Is it wrong? is it a sin?" are questions he asks of many things of which adults make no question. These are positive elements of his religious life, but there are some things his religion does not do for him. It does not make him consistently and continuously good. He is a child and the creature of appetite, and often, with the best intentions to do right, he does wrong. Matthew, the son of Christiana, ate some of the apples which fell over the fence, as the mother and the children were going to the Celestial City, and Matthew had a bad attack of the gripes, says the quaint dreamer, because of his transgression. Children

have much to learn. They are very volatile, thoughtless, and careless, and consequently erring. They are often very quick in their tempers, and sometimes not as respectful in their speech as they should be. They need rebuke, punishment, and restraint. The conversion of a child does not render family government useless, nor render the rod useless; not at all. God chastens those he loves; we must chasten those we love.

They are free from many of the faults of older people, but they have many faults which older people do not have. Many of these faults are not seen as such by them, and are entirely unintentional. "Brother Smith, why don't you make those boys keep their feet still?" said an old preacher to me. "Because they are boys," I said.

We sometimes call things by the wrong name, and blame where God does not blame. We are too exacting, and defeat ourselves by being so. We want a child to have all

the solemnity of a man of years, and we don't find it. I came home from a good meeting with a mother whose little boy had seemed to be deeply interested. She was a little skeptical as to whether the boy knew what he was about, but had a good hope that he did know. I saw her hopes grow feebler when the little fellow came home with a young companion, and spreading a cloth on the floor began to *play checks*. "I was afraid," said an old deacon spoken of by Mr. Hammond, "those children were not in earnest, and now I know it, for I saw that boy of Jones's, who went up for prayer last night, rolling a hoop down the street this morning." Children are frolicsome, and God made them so. They are not to be expected, because they are religious, not to love fun and seek for it; and it is no sign that they are not religious when they love tops and balls and hoops and races; and it would require a great deal more religion

than I ever knew a child to have to make him love work better than play, or castor-oil better than candy.

It would be expecting too much of a Christian child to expect him in all circumstances to do exactly right. Faultless children are found in Miss Alcott's books, but they were brought up in Boston, and never believed in human depravity. Christian children are frequently overtaken in faults, and do things that they know are wrong. They stand on the pedestal of all other Christians, and are to be judged by the same law. That law is: "To whom much is given, of him shall much be required," and "to whom little is given, of him shall little be required."

Nor are all children of the same make-up. Some are much more sensitive than others, some are much more indolent, some more selfish, some more affectionate; and a religious life will necessarily be modified by the child's temperament.

Religious children need much help and sympathy, and those who are older and stronger should give it and be gentle among them as a nurse who cherisheth her children. They must be fed with milk and not with meat. They are to be nourished on the sincere milk of the word.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CONVERSION OF LITTLE CHILDREN UNDERRATED.

I THINK I state two facts: First. that much the larger number of those under eleven years old in Christian families are not converted; and, second, that there is no earnest effort made to secure their conversion.

The first of these facts will not be disputed. It is, however, an important one to be considered. Here is a large class of most hopeful subjects, easily moved upon, susceptible in a high degree to religious impressions, without any obstacles in the way of conversion; and yet they are not converted. They do not profess to be, their parents do not think they are, and the pastors who baptized them in infancy, and who

have their names on the Church record as baptized children, know they are not. The communions come and go, and they do not approach the table. They are moving in a vast company toward the period when none of the advantages around them now will belong to them, and the Church cherishes the hope that ere that time they may become converted; now at least they are not.

The second statement will be questioned. Is there no effort made to secure the conversion of little children? Is there a well-directed and earnest effort to this end? Mark me, I do not ask if there is any effort to make the child intelligent, to teach it the articles of Christian faith, to discipline it to the control of its passions. This is done—and a most important work it is—but is there an effort made to arouse in the child the sense of its own sinfulness, and lead it to a true repentance, to a trusting faith in Jesus Christ? This I doubt very seriously. Is it

done in the Sunday-school? Can it be done there? I have now about closed my fiftieth year of uninterrupted connection with the Sunday-school; I have gone from the infant class through all the grades, and have worked as teacher and as superintendent. I have acquaintance with Sunday-schools of all kinds, and I must not only deny that this work is done there, but declare it as my opinion that as the Sunday-school is at present constituted it cannot be done efficiently by it. The school is a school. It has its work cut out for it. It has such a variety of exercises necessarily that it is unable to give its close attention to this one point. It might do a great deal toward it, and a great deal more than it does. It does often sadly underrate the work of the soul's conversion, and is more intent on making itself entertaining or gaining eclat for its skillful working, and more solicitous for its reputation as being well furnished and doing

first-class educational work, and keeping up its roll, than it is about the religious character of its pupils; but if, as is often the case, the officers feel intensely concerned in the religious welfare of the children, and yet are anxious to carry out the object for which the school is organized, they find it impossible to do the school-work and at the same time do much of any thing special in this direction. As to conversions *in* Sunday-school, I do not think that I ever knew of a dozen. The work there is preparatory, and while more ought to be done, and more in my opinion can be done, yet it is sadly true that it is not and has not been done.

Nor does the pulpit generally make a direct effort for the conversion of little children. The pastor sometimes employs a good woman—sometimes the wife of a professional evangelist, sometimes one of those good women who are called to the work—to talk to his children; but rare enough it is for a

pastor to have a special meeting for the children in the church and to strive to lead them to the Saviour. The little five-minute sermons with which some pastors preface their services are after all only *sermonettes* —little all around. The pastor has so much to do, and is so burdened with his important work, that he has but little time and, he thinks, but little fitness for taking the infants in his arms and gently bearing them to his Master. That he could do more, and that he ought to do more, I will try to show; but I am speaking now of what is done in the average pastorate.

In the family more is done than is done elsewhere by the devout and earnest mother, but I do not think it needs an argument to prove that the conversion of little children is neither sought for nor looked for in the family as a general thing, and that, save certain general encouragements and admonitions and good counsels, very many mothers

neglect this work while their children are small, and hope it will be accomplished in some other way and at some other time. Why is this? I think there is no better answer than to say it is because the importance of the conversion of children is overlooked and undervalued. It does not arise from any want of solicitude nor from any error as to the necessity for conversion. All classes likely to read this little book agree to that; but it does arise from other causes, and the chief one is that suggested above. They do not think it is a matter of prime importance. Is it? Let us see.

CHAPTER IX.

WHY IMPORTANT—THE DEPRAVITY OF THE HUMAN HEART.

I DO not intend to drift into theological discussion save as it is immediately connected with the matter in hand, but a glance at one phase of theology must be had. In 1784 the Methodist preachers in Baltimore accepted as an article of faith one which had been for over two centuries accepted by the Church of England. It expressed in the mildest form possible the view held by the Church from the early centuries. It reads in this way: "Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original right-

eousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually." This doctrine was received by the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, and stands as one of her accepted articles of faith. I think it states what is true, and no more than what is true. Children, left to themselves, will not grow up religious or moral. They will develop the animal appetites, will become selfish, sensual, passionate, and lawless. Religion cannot be transmitted, and the children of the best people, left alone, will develop not the pure and good, but the vile and criminal. This is not a question to be settled by logic or to be decided by our hopes or by our ideas of what ought to be. The declarations of Scripture must be supported by the facts and experiences of men; and if there is one thing more plainly brought out in the world's history than another, it is that as a race we are far gone from original righteousness. To argue that it ought not to be,

and therefore it is not, is not a satisfactory method of reasoning. It is not my purpose to enter into an elaborate argument with reference to a subject that is as old as the days of Augustine. The formula accepted by the Baltimore Christmas Conference, which came to them direct from Mr. Wesley, and which came to him from the Reformers, expresses what I believe to be the exact truth. Children are merely to be let alone, and they will go into evil ways, and that continually. Our own consciousness and our observation alike establish this statement. We can trust a hyacinth bulb to give us a hyacinth, we can trust a rose-bush to give us a rose; but the fairest child that ever lived, if untaught and uncared for, will not give us a saint. We cannot rely upon family or culture or surroundings for purifying the heart. These have all been tried, and all have failed. From the homes of the pious, from the homes of the cultured,

alike, the children of the household have gone forth to lives of crime, to lives of unbelief, to lives of God-despising. It is no mere speculation, it is no hap-hazard thing, it is fearfully and sadly true that the seeds of sin spring up for death as soon as infancy begins. After all, it is a struggle to live; we have only to cease to struggle, and we die. There is no difficulty in developing vice; the trouble is in developing virtue. Piety is not native to the human heart; it must be brought into it.

There are different views of a child's nature, and it is necessary to get the correct one. The first is that of the Optimist, the Unitarian, and Universalist, that there is no native tendency toward evil; that if a child were left to himself, he would develop the good and pure. The answer to this is found in the world's history. In the soft, spice-bearing islands of the South Seas, in cultured China, in Hindoostan, in Egypt, in

Tartary, we see what human nature is when the gospel has not come with its man-dishonoring doctrine of human depravity, as some call it. The Catholics, Roman and Anglican, say the baptismal waters have washed the dismal stain away. Italy and Austria and France and Spain answer this statement. The semi-Pelagians of our own country say God has for Christ's sake put us back into a state of purity like that of Adam in the garden; but also our own experience and observation attest that man here is of his nature inclined to evil, and that continually. The Holy Spirit alone can change this bias of human nature and turn the heart heavenward.

CHAPTER X.

WHY IMPORTANT—WOOINGS OF THE SPIRIT AND HIS WORK ON A CHILD'S HEART.

I HAVE in a chapter before this recognized the truth of the Spirit's work on the child's heart. This work has been well presented in Article VIII. of our religion: "The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasing and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing [going before] us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will." This grace of God is found in the efficient working of God's Holy Spirit. What influence maternal and

paternal piety may have upon one's offspring it is difficult to say. Religious susceptibilities may be, and certainly are, greater in some children than in others, and I think they are more easily aroused and more easily developed in the children whose parents were religious before their birth. We know at least that the children who have been religiously trained are much more easily moved than those who have not been. Childhood is a susceptible period and a formative period, when impressions are easily made, and religious homes have a wonderful power in making lasting impressions.

The children in the primary classes in the Sunday-schools, to whom the Spirit of God has come and on whom the Spirit continually moves, are most admirably situated to become Christians. They have the fewest obstacles in their way, and the largest number of advantages in their favor. They are not skeptical, proud, self-willed; but are

humble, unambitious, teachable, and believe implicitly whatever they are told by those they love. They are not drunken, profane, impure, but are on the side of the good. I speak now of those who have been carefully and religiously trained in the Sunday-schools and in the family. How important, then, to take this period, when the ground is comparatively free from weeds and when it is in admirable condition to sow the seeds of piety, and to nourish it! The comparative freedom, too, from those influences which have such power in after time gives another important factor in this work. The little child in a Christian home has every thing to make him religious. The fearful influences which evil companionship exert upon those exposed to it are not felt in early childhood. The family altar, the daily reading of God's word, the prayers at the mother's knee, the influence of a pious mother's example—all these unite to make

religion comparatively easy to a child, and we only know when these are absent how hard it is for a man to surrender his heart to God. The perfect simplicity of gospel truth—its admirable adaptation to a child's nature—clearly indicates the time at which it should be presented. It staggers the pride of a strong intellect, but to one of these little ones it has nothing in it which seems to his trusting nature to be incredible. The power to believe in the unseen is the one thing which from our infancy grows weaker, and the child who believes all he is told of God, of Christ, of immortality, and accepts it without question, may become in after time a skeptic, who, with philosophy and vain deceit, seeks to gratify the demands of an imperious rationalism. When the gospel is most needed, then the gospel is the easiest accepted. How important, then, that at this time the truth should be presented to the child's heart!

CHAPTER XI.

WHY IMPORTANT—INFLUENCES AROUND CHILDREN.

THE child cannot be always a child. He must go out into a world of sin. He must go with human passion and appetite into circumstances calculated to arouse them to evil exercise. The bright little boy, taught in a Christian home, but whose heart has in it no reverence for God, no love for his law—who is what he was when he was born, save that the innocence of his negative life has by slow degrees been giving way to the temptations addressed to his temper and passions—goes out into a world of wicked boys and becomes infected by them. It is impossible to build a wall so high around our homes as to protect them from moral contagion; and especially is that true

in the Southern land, where the servants of the household have such low views of morality, and especially of purity. Your boy is poisoned before you dream he is in danger. He goes out into the world without religion. No love to God influences him, no fear of God restrains him; he has in him the depraved appetites of poor humanity, and how soon he becomes the victim! My very soul shrinks in horror from remembering the depth of wickedness I found unblushing in the first boys' school I entered after I left my mother. The cruelty, the lying, the indecency, the dishonesty, and especially the unblushing impurity of boys from the best families in the land, are horrible; and, as a teacher, my soul has been shocked at seeing even in little girls exhibitions of wickedness which one could scarcely have supposed possible. The street gamin has his place in story and in song, and is often represented as the noblest of

his kind, but at six years old I have known him to be a liar, a hypocrite, and a thief. Let any teacher who has controlled children speak out as he knows, and what a story he can tell of the evil influences which affect our children from their associates! The placards, bold and glowing and attractive, which showmen paste on our walls are educating to indecency and wickedness a race of boys. Seeing an advertisement of an Augusta (Me.) house, of a very cheap paper with prizes—and this concern seems the center from which these things go out—my little boy, a lad of thirteen, sent his name. The paper was apparently harmless, but the columns were filled with advertisements, calculated to attract boys, of all kinds of wicked pictures and books. Much of our literature for boys and girls is filthy beyond conception. The exhibitions provided for them in cities are vile; and alas! their social amusements are oftentimes calculated only to de-

grade. Let a boy of thirteen years old, taught in a dancing-school, be introduced to a children's party, and with a girl of twelve years old in his arms engage in a round dance, and it requires no cynic to say what will be the result; and yet this thing is seen nightly during the gay season of our large cities. The placards on the walls, the songs sung on the stage, the pictorial papers exhibited on the book-stalls are all of the same tendency. What are we to do? We cannot hide away, we cannot find a pure atmosphere; we cannot escape the tempter —we must provide against his power. A heart full of love to God is a security against all these things. A child who has loved God and prayed from his sixth year, with a trusting heart, will keep himself—or, better still, will be kept by God—as pure as was Daniel in the court at Babylon. How vitally important is it, then, to bring him at the earliest age to Jesus!

CHAPTER XII.

WHY IMPORTANT—HABITS, BAD AND GOOD.

"Is it not time for me to begin the education of my child?" said a good woman to a philosopher.

"How old is she?" said he.

"Four years."

"You have begun four years too late," said the wise man.

Habits are the vehicles through which grace often works. Good habits, formed automatically, become good by sanctifying grace after awhile. Teach a child to pray, to read his Bible, to go to church, and keep him at it; and when he is converted, he is not then to learn how to do these things. They are ready to his hand when converting grace comes in to confirm and strengthen and purify these habits, and they

become a good second nature. They are being formed from birth. The child who has been taught to pray and is not converted gives it up, if he is a Protestant, when he gets toward manhood, and continues it, if he is a Catholic, as a kind of atonement for his sins. One day a Syrian notion-peddler came to my door. He was a Roman Catholic. Among his books were two small religious manuals for children. Prayers were given, beautiful ones for morning and night, and grace at meals, instructions on the way to prepare for confession, for the mass, of faith; but faith was belief in the Church's teachings, and there was no Holy Ghost in the book. Get such a child converted, however, and these habits, confirmed by grace, make him a beautiful Christian. Let him remain unconverted, and he becomes a wicked formalist. Moral habits, not expressly religious, the result of careful training, may be formed in childhood and be-

come a great aid in future Christian life, but if religion does not come in to strengthen and direct them, they grow feebler with advancing years. When Coleridge heard a friend speak of letting children alone, he took him into his garden. "There," he said, "you see the child's heart; if fruits grow not, weeds do." We cannot begin too early to train our children to form good habits; we cannot too soon realize how little they are worth without a religious affection to support them. But evil habits require no culture: they come of themselves.

The child must be taught to pray. A prayerless habit springs naturally, and it continues to grow stronger and stronger. An early conversion brings into being the good habits which with increasing years are more and more important and more and more powerful; let an evil habit grow on, and it becomes almost omnipotent. Habits of bad

temper result in the future in almost uncontrollable passion.

The evil habits of animal indulgence become oftentimes the tyrants which drag children to a grave of infamy. To anticipate some of these forms of wicked indulgence we must begin young, very young, and by constant effort eradicate these evil tendencies before they form habits; for when formed, while not incurable, they are fearfully dangerous. There is but one way to prevent this formation of evil habits. It is to have a child's heart full of religion, and thus you will make him strong to resist all these tendencies; and these habits, never formed, are never to be cured. Let any of us look back and say whether all his life long he has not suffered from the effects of some evil, if not vile, habit, formed before he was fourteen years old. Recognizing this fearful danger, let us begin so early that the love of God becomes a habit, and

reverence and prayer cannot point to a beginning. I am just from a camp-meeting where I heard a saintly old man of eighty-one years tell of how from his earliest recollection he had been praying; how when he was a little child he was converted, and how at twelve years old he knew that what he had years before was religion; and how he had always been in the Church. Never drunken, never profane, never godless! O how beautiful such a life! how serene such an old age!

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW TO EFFECT THE CONVERSION OF CHILDREN—FAITH, PRAYER, EFFORT.

I TRUST I have clearly brought out in the preceding chapters the need of the conversion, the possibility of the conversion, and the importance of the conversion of children. I now enter upon an inquiry as to how to secure it. It will be remembered that I do not attempt to point out the first beginnings of a religious life in children; and with many children beginning a religious life in very early childhood any thing like a marked conversion from good to bad is not to be looked for. I know not a few children who have as little idea of the way of faith which an adult sinner must take as is possible, but whose moral character and whose religious character are very beautiful.

What we propose to do now is to bring the child to a true idea of his need of a Saviour, and lead him to see that he has one: to make a good child a Christian child. If this is done, we must have faith in God and faith in the child. If we are disposed to doubt the work of the Divine Spirit on the heart of a child, if we refer every thing to the emotions, the nervous excitability of children, and if we discredit every apparent movement toward a religious life in children, we may not expect to secure their conversion. If this conversion is secured, we must believe in its possibility. I have already attempted to establish this point clearly. If we desire it, we must remember that the Holy Spirit alone can effect it, and we must call upon God for the Spirit's power. As parents we should pray earnestly for the early conversion of our children, and as pastors we should pray for it and look for it. The conversion of children must be an

awakening, and only the Spirit of God can do that work effectively. The Church ought to pray, the Sunday-school ought to pray specifically and constantly for the conversion of these little ones. From the infant class upward, not from the Bible class downward, should be the way taken. I cannot press this too much. There may be a mere surface work on the hearts of children, a mere move upon their sensibilities and emotions, and no permanent good may result; but when any thing is relied upon but the mighty Spirit of God, this is sure to be the case. Why the Church is the mother of the Christian, the bride of Christ, I may not say; but without her earnest prayers, united and fervent, we can no more expect children to be converted than we may expect adults to be. The parent should pray in deep earnest, with living faith, with untiring patience, and, praying, look eagerly for results. Let every awakening of conscience,

every inquiry about God and heaven, be recognized as God's answer to the prayer, till it reaches its full answer in a child's saying, "I know him."

Each pastor who prays for his people should remember the lambs of his flock. They should be known to him and specially mentioned by him. If he has any faith in prayer for others, he surely can have faith in repeating the prayer found in the baptismal service: "That the old Adam in these children may be so buried that the new man may be raised up in them; that they may have power and strength to have victory, and to triumph against the devil, the world, and the flesh." Surely the superintendent and teachers in the Sunday-school will not fail to pray for those committed to their charge.

But children are not going to be brought to Jesus, unless an effort is made to bring them, any more than adults are, and there should be special work done to secure this

result. It is not essentially different from the work done to secure the salvation of the older people, but has its personal features and demands particular attention. This special work we will now consider.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PREACHER AND THE CHILDREN.

I PLACE this first because I believe it the most important. The work of teaching ought to begin at home, and the mother should be the first evangelist, and around the family altar the child should worship for the first time. The Sunday-school may have in its infant department something to do with this training, with influencing children to take the steps needful, and these two departments of work are to be considered; but the most important work is to be done by the pastor, who represents the whole Church. He has been chosen of God and put in charge of the whole flock, lambs as well as sheep. What can he do to gather the lambs into the fold? In the first place, he should know the children. If his pas-

torate is too large to allow this, *it is too large.* The flock of sheep that is so large that one shepherd cannot see after the lambs as well as the sheep is too large. A man like Spurgeon can be a great evangelist without being a pastor, and can relegate the pastoral office to others, but such exceptions are only found in very large communities. Let the pastor go to the infant classes and learn who the children are. They belong to him, and he must give account for them in the great day. A pastor should always ask for the children when visiting, and, if possible, see them. He should meet them specially. Jesse Lee used to have the children of the Society at Lovely Lane meet him every Saturday afternoon. He knew them all. One of the most beautiful pictures in our language is the picture of the parish of Legh Richmond, in the Isle of Wight, and of the young cottager. We are too far from our children oftentimes. We must get closer to them.

Personal intercourse is needful in order to personal conversation, and the pastor should talk to the children about personal religion. He should not be content to catechise, but should press home his questions, very gently but very decidedly.

The pastor should preach to children as he preaches to adults. At least one sermon a month should be given to them. It should be carefully prepared, and delivered at the most popular hour. A silly sermonette is a mere trifle. The children must be fed on milk, and not on water-gruel. The sermon should not be a mere moral essay, but a gospel sermon; not a hap-hazard talk, but a carefully prepared sermon. I may be pardoned for giving the outline of a sermon I have preached a great many times to little children. It is about forty minutes long. The text is: "What must I do to be saved?" A sketch of the sermon would be about this:

"Paul and Silas were two good preachers.

They were traveling preachers, and they came to a fine city where there were no Christians and no church; so they had to preach out-of-doors, and they went to the river-bank and preached there. Well, they healed a poor sick woman, and, strangely enough, the people got angry with them, and the magistrates beat them and sent them to jail, and the cruel jailer shut them up and fastened their feet. But they did not care; they loved God and knew that God loved them, and so they began to sing and pray, and then God shook the prison and set them free; but they did not run away, and when the jailer was about to kill himself they told him they were all there. Then the jailer knew they were God's men, and he was very much frightened, but cried out and asked what he must do to be saved. Why was he so frightened? Why was he so troubled? It was because he was not saved. Now are you saved? What is it to be saved?

"1. It is to have our sins forgiven. Are you a sinner? Did you ever tell a falsehood? Did you ever get angry? Did you ever speak saucily to your mother? Did you ever take any thing not yours? Did you ever use bad words? Have you always been as good as you could be? If you have not, then you are a sinner, and must be saved.

"2. Are your hearts good? Do they love good things and hate bad things? Do you find it easy to do right and hard to do wrong? Do you find in your heart no pride of dress, or of your good looks, or of your nice home? Do you love those that don't love you? If you do not, your heart is not good like the heart of Jesus.

"Now, how are you to be saved?

"1. You must know you are sinners.

"2. You must confess and forsake your sins.

"3. You must take Jesus as your Saviour."

This is a mere outline of the way in which I think children ought to be preached to. Have confidence in their sound sense, and while you use the illustrations and adopt the manner of address necessary for them, let the body of the sermon be full of strong evangelical doctrine. Often ask them forward for prayer. Do not let it become a mere heartless formality, but make it a real, earnest, converting service.

I have found it well, in charges where it was practicable, to have a special evangelistic series of meetings for children. An account of one held in Elberton only recently will answer as a specimen of the meetings I have found very profitable. On Sunday morning I preached on the possibility and importance of the conversion of children; in the afternoon I preached to the children on their sins and their Saviour, and invited those who knew they were sinners to come forward and kneel, and ask

God to forgive them and give them clean hearts.

I had a mothers' meeting in the morning, a children's meeting in the afternoon, and a young people's meeting at night. I had a number of cards for the "Lovers of Jesus." They were attractively designed, with a cross and a crown as the illustration. On them was printed:

God is my Father.
Jesus is my Saviour.
The Holy Spirit is my helper.
I take Jesus to be my Saviour.
I promise to love him, trust him, and to try always to obey him.
I will go to church every Sunday, if I can.
I will go to Sunday-school regularly.
I will read my Bible.
I will try to be good and to do good.
I will pray every night and morning.
Age, ——. — [Name.]

A number of children joined this little society. I preached to them on the witness of the Spirit, on repentance and faith,

on the importance of early piety, etc. I always had an altar service. I often catechised them, and I then asked all who felt it their duty to join the Church to stand up.

I then, on another day, asked all who wished to join the Methodist Church to give the pastor their names. Thirty-two did so. I gave each child a copy of my little book, "The Child and the Saviour;" and to those who wished to join the Methodist Church, a copy of the "Young Methodist." In this case, and in all cases in which the meetings have been successful, I had the hearty co-operation of the pastor.

Preaching to children is not as difficult as many think it. It ought to be plain, simple, to some extent dramatic, intermixed with religious incidents *which you know* to be true, many of which you are able to draw from your own observation. When children come forward for prayer, let it be *prayer*. Don't try to save them by a catechism, such as:

"Do you believe Jesus can save you? Do you believe he will? Do you believe he does? If so, get up here and say so." In every case the ease with which this work is done often makes persons skeptical, but it is not easier than the conversion of the three thousand on the day of Pentecost, of the woman that was a sinner, of the thief on the cross, and of the Philippian jailer.

It can be done; but the effort must be made, or it will not be done. But will it abide? That depends.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WAY TO SECURE THE CONVERSION OF CHILDREN IN SUNDAY-SCHOOL WORK.

THE Sunday-school has now become the Biblical school. It was once a mere school of letters, with the catechism and the Bible as a part of its course, but its main end was to give the elements of an education to those who had no other opportunities to learn. It was a theological school almost altogether; it has now become a Biblical school. It is a school. It is not a congregation, waiting to be taught from the pulpit, but a school. Knowledge of exegesis, of Biblical geography, of ancient customs, of sacred and profane history, are the requisites in the teacher. Teaching is the main work. The social features, the music, and lectures, are only designed to help for-

ward this end. In some Churches—the Catholic and Episcopal, and in a less degree the Presbyterian—the doctrines of the Church are made prominent, but in nearly all the schools the exegetical is the feature. It does not aim to secure conversion, but to prepare the way for it. Can it be an evangelical, as it is an educational agency?

I avow my opinion that its teaching function is its most important one, and that it cannot give that up without changing its character; but I am satisfied it can be more evangelical than it is, and can be more efficient as a *nurturing* power and yet preserve its teaching function. I do not think it necessary for it to cease to teach in order for it to make an effort to secure the application of its teaching; and I therefore suggest some methods by which I think its work may be more effective in this line. In the first place, let those connected with it recognize the importance of this result and work to this end.

The superintendent of a Sunday-school in the Southern Methodist Church is chosen by a Quarterly Conference on the nomination of his pastor. He has a position of vast responsibility. He ought to have great affection for his pupils, and ought to be greatly loved by them. He ought to see to it that the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, those that teach the way to be saved, are carefully taught; and he ought to teach them himself. A five minutes' drill on the catechism ought to come as regularly as the Sunday comes. Until the moral law, the way of faith, repentance, the witness of the Spirit, regeneration, justification, the work of the Holy Spirit, are better known to his children than the way to Damascus, his work is not done. Occasionally—not perfunctorily, but earnestly, prayerfully—he ought to give them an affectionate call to the Saviour, and urge them to seek religion. When the children are awakened, he ought

to be the most earnest in trying to secure their happy conversion. In holding some meetings in Atlanta, some years since, W. A. Hemphill, one of the busiest men in the city, superintendent of Trinity Sunday-school, found time to come to the children's 4 o'clock meeting; and John C. Courtney, superintendent of First Church school, found time to come to every service in his church aimed at this end. The result was that fifty of the Trinity children joined the Church on one Sabbath, and as many from First Church. The superintendent ought now and then, not too frequently, to call his teachers together, not for the study of the lesson, nor to lay before them new plans, but to pray for the children, and to talk to them about their salvation. He ought to give the pastor ample time to talk to the children from the platform on this subject. I think he ought to provide himself with such little tractates as he may find valuable

to give to the children. "The Young Cottager" of Legh Richmond, "The Child and the Saviour," are two among many that I can think of at this moment which he could profitably distribute. There are many little books which his reading will tell him are suited to a child. As a gift from him they will be doubly valued. He should quietly and affectionately speak privately to his children, especially to the boys getting away from childhood, and urge them to come to Jesus. He has many other things to do which only a consecrated man, set apart to this work, will be apt to know, but which the Spirit will teach him.

There should be in every school frequent, but not too frequent, services which aim at immediate conversion. I should advise that before the monthly communion service all the other exercises should be cut short, and earnest and special prayer should be made in the school for converting power.

The Sunday-school should co-operate with the pastor. The children should be urged to attend the regular services, and the teachers should see to it that the children go, and when the special services of which I have spoken are held the teachers should always be on hand.

When that excellent woman Miss Laura A. Haygood was teacher of a large class of young ladies in Atlanta—of those young ladies of wealth and position, who were to be society women, without religion—her heart was burdened for them; and busy as she was with her school and mission work, she always found time to meet with them in the afternoon meetings, go to them, talk with them, and pray audibly for them. The result was they were all converted. That Sunday-school is a sad failure which sends out its children unconverted into a sinful world. It ought not to be so, it need not be so. O that I could say it will not longer be so!

This work is not likely to be done by a teacher who is unconverted, or who does not live close to God. The teacher who has charge of a Sunday-school class without a true idea of the importance of the work in which he is engaged, and who does not feel that he has been divinely called to do it, and do it well, is sadly out of place. Souls are in his care, and for them he is to give account; and I cannot too earnestly urge him to consecrate himself to God and to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit, without which all his work will be ineffective. That teacher who wisely wins the souls of those committed to his care shall have the rich reward of heavenly peace on earth and of heaven above. Suppose a very zealous teacher of a class of boys, from ten to twelve years old—boys full of mischief, and some of them very wicked—should suddenly address the worst and say in a tone of great solemnity: "James, do you want to go to

hell? You are on the way there now. Don't you think you ought to stop and become a Christian?" You might expect Jim to respond in such a way as to make the class roar and the teacher angry. Skillful, affectionate, private conversation is what children need, and, as far as my observation goes, what they don't get.

Earnest prayer for each member of the class. Specific pleading will not be unattended with great blessing. The teachers must do for their classes what the superintendent does for the whole school. After completing the lesson, they should often ask about those doctrines which must be known in order to trust in Jesus. They are not many, and are very simple. "You are a sinner, and need a Saviour. Jesus is your Saviour. You must repent and trust in him if you expect to be saved." Talk to children about their personal religion, however, ought always to be in private. Children

are exceedingly sensitive, and they are very unwilling to show publicly their true feelings on this subject. And a public inquiry addressed to a boy in a promiscuous assembly in which he is singled out will always do harm.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WAY TO SECURE THE CONVERSION OF CHILDREN—THE FAMILY.

I PERHAPS ought to have put first in order of time the family as the great instrument in God's hand of securing the conversion and religious development of the children, for no agency is so powerful. To substitute for the home influence any other would be an error of the most deadly kind. A religious child may spring from a godless household, but it is a rare exception. It is sadly true that godless children do come out of godly families, but it is also a truth that the larger part of the truly pious come from homes of piety. I am not, however, in this volume speaking of family government in its wide sweep as much as of the influence of parents in securing the early conversion of

the children. If this is done, the parents themselves, especially the mothers, must be genuinely, consistently, and attractively religious. They must have religion, and it must be of the right kind. A mere form of godliness, a religion of mere opinion, a religion of sensibility, and even a religion of conscience, will have comparatively little power; but a religion of love to God, such as Moses enjoined upon the parents at Horeb, where, before he gave instructions to teach, he said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and strength," will be almost omnipotent. All our teaching will be comparatively in vain if it is not backed up by a good example. The parent must teach. The Sunday-school cannot take the mother's place. Before the little one is old enough to go to the Sunday-school the mother should tell it the story of the cross. The child should be carefully instructed in the first catechism. Feeling

the need for a Methodist catechism simple enough for children of very tender years, I prepared an "Infant's Catechism" of twelve lessons, published by J. W. Burke & Co. and Barbee & Smith. The answers are very short, the questions plain. A second catechism for older children follows. The "Infant's Life of Jesus" is intended as an historical study on Jesus' life. I think these little books meet a want. The parent should use some simple manuals like these and teach these lessons before the child goes to the infant class in the Sunday-school. I am not at all sure it is wisest or best to send children under five years old, or at least under four, to the Sunday-school at all; and I am sure it is not when they are not taught at home. The family altar, morning and evening prayer, prepares the child for an early conversion, and without that we may have little expectation of it. The parent who is too busy and too unconcerned to pray for

his children may not expect the child to have much concern about his salvation himself. Prayer with children in the closet will help this work forward. If the mother has a closet and takes her little ones into it, then she may rely upon their going into their own. And co-operation with the Church in her efforts to save the children is an absolute essential.

The giving the child to God in holy baptism, the teaching and government of the little one, the impressing upon the child of its need of a Saviour, should begin in the family, and never should there come a time when the work of Christian nurture should cease. The pastor can do much, the Sunday-school can do much, but the parent has more power than all combined.

CHAPTER XVII.

CARE FOR THE LAMBS.

THE Church is the mother. The children who always belonged to the kingdom of heaven, when by a true conversion they are adopted into the family of God, need a mother's tender care. They are lambs who need the Shepherd's keeping. They are babes who need to be fed with the sincere milk of the word. The grain of mustard-seed sends up its little blade, and it is scarcely to be seen; but let a tender care be given to it, and it becomes a great herb. The lamb is the most helpless and delicate, but tenderly cared for it becomes the chief of the flock. How shall we nurture the children? what plan can be devised whereby these young Christians may be kept from backsliding? That they may backslide is too

sadly evident to demand proof; that they do, is fearfully true.

It is a fact, however, despite all the difficulties in the way, that more children who profess religion in childhood grow up to be steadfast Christians than any other class; but it is painfully true that many who begin a religious life in childhood do not continue to lead it. What can we do to prevent this result? Just what we do to prevent the backsliding of other babes in Christ. In order to prevent their backsliding they must be brought forward; but this advice would be too general. I am sure that the pastor might do a great deal for the protection of the lambs of his flock, which none but a pastor could do. Besides the sermons from the pulpit addressed to them, besides the good books he places in their hands, besides the kindly counsel he gives them in every-day intercourse, he ought to have a special class of children, and with them hold a class-meet-

ing. How to conduct it will be a matter which he alone can decide, but I have found this to be a good plan:

On Saturday morning I had the children to meet together; we sung and prayed in concert; we then read in concert a chapter of the Bible, and as we read a verse at a time I gave such comments as I thought best, all of a practical kind. Say the subject suggested was private prayer, as would be the case in reading Matthew vi. I would talk about the closet and how a little child should pray, how often and for what; and then I would have a free and informal talk with each one about his habits of prayer, and his religious life generally. Then we would sing and pray and disperse. The service can be made very profitable and very interesting.

Neglect of children received into the Church is a crying sin, and the pastor who fails to care for them has a fearful account to render.

The Sunday-school teacher ought to be the pastor's main assistant in this work. The teacher knows his class—knows who are members of the Church, who have been converted. He does not have so large a class that he cannot see after them, and it is in his power to watch over their souls with a care no other can show. Bishop McTyeire once said to me: "I have, I think, the solution of the class-meeting problem. We cannot do as much as we wish to do, so we cannot bring back the old-time class-meeting; but if we will turn the attention of Sunday-school teachers in this direction, we will have something better. The teacher meets the class regularly. He knows them all. He does not have too many. Now let him be expected to watch over their souls; and if he is in earnest, how effectually he can do so!" This is practicable, but this will require a high order of Christian grace and of zeal for the Lord's service. It is not a

burdensome requirement; and if the Sunday-school teacher realized his responsibility, it would be done.

But the young Christian, like the little babe, is better cared for in the sacred precincts of the home. Nothing can supplant the home. Thank God, our favored Southern land is a land of homes, and in these sacred castles the father and mother are chief rulers. They are the high-priests, and they make their offerings for the children. They are God's appointed teachers, and, loving him with all their heart, they are prepared to bring their children up for God. Away out in the fens of Lincolnshire, with a rude peasantry on either side of them, with neither culture nor religion in their parishioners, Samuel and Susanna Wesley were living. Here they brought up their large family of girls and boys. Every one of them who reached mature years became eminently religious, and such a triad of gifted men

and ministers as Samuel, John, and Charles Wesley, her sons, the world has seldom seen. Her method of training her children was this: They were taught obedience early, before they could talk; as soon as they could speak they were taught the Lord's Prayer, and made to repeat it twice a day; then the catechism and some portion of Scripture; they were taught to be quiet at family prayers, and at five years old to read the Bible. She says: "I resolved to begin with my own children, so I take such proportion of time as to talk to each child by itself on something that relates to its spiritual concern. On Monday I talk with Molly, on Tuesday with Hetty, Wednesday with Nancy, Thursday with Jacky, Saturday with Charles, and with Emily and Sukey on Sunday." At that time John Wesley was ten and Charles was only four. Without family religion, there is little hope that the delicate Christian infant will survive. It would

require a volume to say what parents should do for the religious nurture of their children, and perhaps no man could wisely direct; but one thing is certain, without government, without restraint, without correction, no fallible child is likely to advance in Christian life, however genuine may be the work of grace in his heart. The praying mother, the godly father, who have given their children to God, are not likely to be at a loss to know what ought to be done to help them onward.

I have not said all that ought to be said, but all that I can say now. The vastest interests are depending on the proper solution of the problem I have here considered. No question ranks that which asks, "Can children be brought into Christ's fold in early childhood, and kept there?"

I say they can. Will they be? That depends.

THE END.

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